



## Crossing Borders in Quarantine

By Maissa Khatib

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I am at my home in El Paso, Texas, under a “shelter-in-place” order, writing this piece of deep reflection about thoughts and emotions during this pandemic. My main purpose is to tell my story as an immigrant living on the border during these dizzying times, with the intention of focusing on what has been working for me. I hope that sharing my experience of embracing and coping will light a little candle in the midst of this darkness and uncertainty about life.

It is essential to reflect on all the changes that this virus has brought to our lives. An expression that has been circulating on social media caught my attention. “We’re not going back to normal as normal was not working” (Taylor, 2020). In this paper, this expression will serve as the frame around my thoughts, perspectives and reflections on being quarantined in El Paso, a border city also known as the borderlands. This border region is centered on two large cities: Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, U.S. It is one of the borders that I will revisit in this paper. It is important to remember that there are different types of borders and boundaries: some are visible and natural while others are invisible and created. In both cases, across all borders and boundaries, there are projections of us and others, the powerful and the weak, based on racial, economic, linguistic, and cultural differences. In this piece, I will reflect on my

own emotions and my ways of coping, caring, and healing through this pandemic and the changes that have invaded my life and struck me like lightning. Change has always overwhelmed me, and I always tried to resist it, but I have become aware of how sometimes change is needed to clear the way for the “new” to take place.

During this current pandemic and the order to stay at home, free time has forced me to revisit and re-examine events in my life that led to who I became today. I was born and raised in Lebanon. My father is a Palestinian refugee and my mother is Lebanese. I inherited my father’s refugee status since the Lebanese law for naturalization is patrilineal. I grew up learning how to navigate the daily discrimination and racism against Palestinians in Lebanon. Growing up as a Palestinian refugee, I became aware of the inhumane and brutal policies that forbid people with a refugee status like me to live a normal life like my Lebanese friends and classmates and deprive us from freedom and human rights. Living in Lebanon heavily impacted me. I became a woman who was insecure, scared, and anxious about being stateless. I was the “other”, unaccepted and systematically forced to leave. While living in Lebanon, I had to cross visible and invisible borders daily. My life in Lebanon made me experience the lack of belonging to a place, a national identity, and a community. The experience heavily impacted me emotionally disabling my ability to know what I want to do and be; everything was foggy. I always acted out of fear and a desperate need to belong and exist. The only thing that was clear was the urgency to cross a different border, the urgency to leave.

In 1995, I moved from Lebanon to El Paso, Texas as a wife. While I was establishing my life in a new place trying to adapt to all the changes, raising my two children and working on my education, my three-year old daughter was diagnosed with brain cancer. I had to move to Houston where my daughter received her treatment at MD Anderson hospital. My daughter's physical, emotional, and learning needs; my need to reconnect with my husband and fourteen-month old son; and my need to resume my higher education while being away from my support system in Lebanon were all difficult and necessary parts of my life that required lots of attention, time, and energy.

I was twenty-two years old when I came to the United States. During the span of a quarter century in El Paso, Texas, I raised my children, pursued my doctoral degree, got a job that aligns with my passion, lost my daughter and separated from my husband. A life journey full of events: the happy and sad ones. I have been living here for longer than I lived in Lebanon, but throughout the years in El Paso, I was occupied with my children's needs, my role as a wife, and my dream of attaining a graduate degree and become an academic. Such a busy life did not leave me any spare time to pause and reflect. I never delved deeply with my inner self. I feared it and resisted it so strongly. I do not know why. Maybe I did not want to revisit and awaken painful experiences. Now I have lots of time to sit, meditate and reflect. Therefore, COVID-19 has a positive impact on me.

Sometime ago I read Siddhartha: An Indian Tale by Hermann Hesse. I enjoyed learning about Siddhartha's spiritual search and fulfillment emphasizing self-assertive individuality. My reflective writing here echoes Siddhartha's search: this time in

quarantine is urging me to examine my own life, to think of all the borders that I have crossed and still need to cross, to connect with my inner self. Looking back at experiences in my life has brought me to a state of realization and deep understanding that “everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me” (Hesse, 2017, p.116). During this quarantine time, I have followed in Siddhartha’s steps: I fast, wait, and think. I added another step, too: journaling.

I have crossed several borders - physical, linguistic and cultural- in my life and have been in El Paso for many years, but I have noticed that I have never thought deeply about this city: how I feel towards it and its impact on my life. During the years here in El Paso, people’s curiosity about my identity did not resonate well with me. It made me feel like a stranger who does not belong, as I always felt in Lebanon.

This period of shelter-in-place gave me the opportunity to revisit all those experiences and think deeply from within, examining where I am now and how I genuinely feel about El Paso and its people, observing my current relationships with colleagues, friends, and neighbors during these challenging times. This difficult time of social-distance and lock-down has shown how people around me are caring, nurturing, and loving. Away from the noise, distractions, and the daily packed schedule, I am able now to realize that El Paso has made me feel welcomed and valued just by looking back at my life journey in El Paso and how I prevailed despite the challenges due to the support I received from various people. I am able now to confidently say that El Paso

has a welcoming culture and openness to diversity and inclusion, which have made me feel that I do belong and that this is home; a word that did not exist in my daily vocabulary. I finally deeply understand and feel Mahmoud Darwish's words: "I came from there... I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a single one: Home" (2003).

The lock-down in El Paso has given me the courage to let my pain arise and be able to face it. The current quarantine has given me the space, the silence to grieve my daughter's loss freely away from social norms, expectations, and judgment. I have been able to cross boundaries that confined my emotions and feelings of loss and deep sadness. In this country, we are expected to control our emotions and isolate them from the public. We always apologize when we cannot prevent a tear from surfacing up in our eyes or when our voice shakes. Being at home and having a flexible virtual work schedule have been a relief as I am allowing grief to manifest as it wants and at any time. Before the shelter-in-place order, I always performed according to the social norms and work environment policies and others' expectations and judgments. Grieving freely has opened up the space to take care of myself and find ways to cope and heal.

While hunkering in fear, I have gotten more time to reflect, examine, revisit the past, assess the present and readjust my plans for the future. My story of quarantining across borders has opened a can of worms and has helped me to reflect deeply, to face my old fears and sorrows, clearing the way to change my hamster-wheel daily life and cross various borders and boundaries in my life fearlessly. Through the process of

delving deep within during this quarantining and social distance period, I have realized that change requires urgency, focus, and courage – I am ready for it.



#### Work Cited

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